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Fathers Gain Respect From Experts (and Mothers)

By LAURIE TARKAN

It used to irk Melissa Calapini when her 3-year-old daughter, Haley, hung around her father while he fixed his cars. Ms. Calapini thought there were more enriching things the little girl could be doing with her time.

But since the couple attended a parenting course — to save their relationship, which had become overwhelmed by arguments about rearing their children — Ms. Calapini has had a change of heart. Now she encourages the father-daughter car talk.

“Daddy’s bonding time with his girls is working on cars,” said Ms. Calapini, of Olivehurst, Calif. “He has his own way of communicating with them, and that’s O.K.”

As much as mothers want their partners to be involved with their children, experts say they often unintentionally discourage men from doing so. Because mothering is their realm, some women micromanage fathers and expect them to do things their way, said Marsha Kline Pruett, a professor at the [Smith College](#) School for Social Work at Smith College and a co-author of the new book “Partnership Parenting,” with her husband, the child psychiatrist Dr. Kyle Pruett (Da Capo Press).

Yet a mother's support of the father turns out to be a critical factor in his involvement with their children, experts say — even when a couple is divorced.

“In the last 20 years, everyone's been talking about how important it is for fathers to be involved,” said Sara S. McLanahan, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton. “But now the idea is that the better the couple gets along, the better it is for the child.”

Her research, part of a project based at Princeton and called the [Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study](#), found that when couples scored high on positive relationship traits like willingness to compromise, expressing affection or love for their partner, encouraging or helping partners to do things that were important to them, and having an absence of insults and criticism, the father was significantly more likely to be engaged with his children.

Uninvolved fathers have long been accused of lacking motivation. But research shows that many societal obstacles conspire against them. Even as more fathers are changing diapers, dropping the children off at school and coaching soccer, they are often pushed aside in ways large and small.

“The walls in family resource centers are pink, there are women's magazines in the waiting room, the mother's name is on the files, and the home visitor asks for the mother if the father answers the door,” said Philip A. Cowan, an emeritus professor of [psychology](#) at the [University of California, Berkeley](#), who along with his wife, Carolyn Pape Cowan, has conducted decades of research on families. “It's like fathers are not there.”

In recent years, several fathers' rights organizations have offered father-only parenting programs and groups, and studies have shown that these help men become more responsive and engaged with their children.

But [a new randomized, controlled study](#) conducted by the Pruettts and the Cowans found that the families did even better if mothers were brought into the picture.

In the study, low-income couples were randomly placed into a father-mother group, a father-only group and a control group of couples. The controls were given one information session; the other two groups met for 16 weeks at family resource centers in California, discussing various parental issues.

In both of those groups, the researchers found, the fathers not only spent more time with their children than the controls did but were also more active in the daily tasks of child-rearing. They became more emotionally involved with their children, and the children were much less aggressive, hyperactive, depressed or socially withdrawn than children of fathers in the control group.

But notably, the families in the couples group did best. They had less parental stress and more marital happiness than the other parents studied, suggesting that the critical difference was not greater involvement by the fathers in child-rearing but greater emotional support between couples.



“The study emphasizes the importance of couples’ figuring parenting out together and accepting the different ways of parenting,” Dr. Kline Pruett said.

Fathers tend to do things differently, Dr. Kyle Pruett said, but not in ways that are worse for the children. Fathers do not mother, they father.

Dr. Kyle Pruett added: “Dads tend to discipline differently, use humor more and use play differently. Fathers want to show kids what’s going on outside their mother’s arms, to get their kids ready for the outside world.” To that end, he said, they tend to encourage risk-taking and problem-solving.

The study was financed by the California Office of Child Abuse Prevention, which is looking for ways to involve fathers more at the state’s many family resource centers. Experts say improving the way fathers are treated in many settings, public and private, is an important public health goal.

For example, they say, pictures of families on the walls of clinics and public agencies should have fathers in them. All correspondence should be addressed to both mother and father. Staff members should be welcoming to men. Steps like these promote early and lasting involvement by fathers.

“We want people to think about how positive father engagement in this co-parenting model would work in their [foster care](#) agency, local health clinic, pediatric office, adoption agency or school,” Dr. Kyle Pruett said. “That’s where an awful lot of the barriers are.”

At home, the experts recommend that couples keep talking about parenting issues and do their best to appreciate each other’s strengths. A recurring argument among couples is that each partner thinks he or she knows what is right; a mother may accuse the father of allowing too much television, while a father may tell a mother she isn’t strict enough with discipline.

“Instead, they should be saying, ‘How can each of us be the kind of parent that we are?’ ” Dr. Philip Cowan said. “I don’t think it’s abuse for a dad to sit with that little kid watching TV.”

These experts agree that parents should not focus solely on the children.

“Parents work all day, and feel as if they need to give every other minute to the kids,” Dr. Cowan said, “but if they don’t take care of the relationship between them, they’re not taking care of the whole story.”